Spurred by new and vibrant venues such as the Tapp's Arts Center, Mast General Store, the historic Sheraton Hotel and the University of South Carolina's IT-ology building, downtown Columbia is gaining a reputation in the Southeast as a hot spot or very cool, just as the brand implies. The Columbia Museum of Art, First Thursday, the farmer's market and other events and attractions sustain downtown's new energy.

Rich Harrill

Our city has evolved as a suburban city, with several communities beyond a city core. Many have their own distinct identities and even their own brands; economic competition, and some say fragmentation, is evident. Overcoming this requires compromise and cooperation. We must pull together to revitalize downtown, understanding that a high tide lifts all boats, that a strong downtown will attract people from elsewhere in South Carolina and beyond to Columbia and surrounding communities. In other words, all residents become stakeholders.

Success generally depends on planning and design, public buy-in and collaboration and cooperation. Yet while plans exist for many of Columbia's districts and neighborhoods, they rarely define pedestrian or economic linkages, for example, between downtown, North Main and the proposed Bull Street development—all less than a mile from one another.

Business development and job creation must be addressed at the level it often matters most: the neighborhood, or block. People feel better about their neighborhoods when families are stable and employed. Design must strike a balance between fitting into the existing urban fabric and architectural heritage, but be updated to appeal to new visitors and prospective residents.

In addition, the influx of students, shoppers, commuters and others into downtown calls for consistent law enforcement, although much has been improved through neighborhood policing. Perceived safety leads to more foot traffic and, as a result, extended business hours.

Finally, hotel and restaurant taxes should be used for events that can demonstrate return-on-investment, but also show how this impact might benefit multiple districts or neighborhoods. Again, that incoming tide should lift everyone's boats.

Columbia has come a long way, and it has great potential. A fully revitalized downtown will be a showcase for the arts and tourism and as such prove to be a good economic development strategy. Why? Because creative industries typically attract other types of enterprises important to South Carolina's economy, including those in technology, energy, real estate and health care.

Imagine Columbia as a technology hub, an arts center or a destination for retirees and even medical tourists, guided by regional partnerships in government, business and academia. Our capital city is like the rest of South Carolina: For economic development to fully ripen, we must embrace new ways of thinking, work together as a community and keep the bandwagon on a steady course.

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